

Altruism or Self-Actualisation? Disabled Volunteers' Perceptions of the Benefits of Volunteering

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INTRODUCTION

Since the election to the British Government of "New Labour" in 1997, voluntary action and volunteering have become highly political issues (National Council for Voluntary Organisations, 2002; Brown, 2005) with numerous government-backed schemes, such as the current "year of the volunteer" initiative, aimed at promoting volunteering amongst various sections of the community across the United Kingdom (Nausbaum, 2005). Despite such initiatives, volunteerism amongst the disabled population remains a largely invisible phenomenon. This paper aims to address this issue by drawing attention to the various beneficiaries of the voluntary activities of 47 wheelchair users volunteering within different organizational settings in the UK.

Although there exists a considerable amount of literature analysing the individual and collective motivations of volunteers (Liao-Troth & Dunn, 1999; Wardell, Lishman, & Whalley, 2000), very few studies have identified benefits of volunteering that are not associated with motivation. Whilst not focusing specifically upon the benefits of volunteering, studies by Hustinx and Lamertyn (2004) and Hadden (2004) both suggest that volunteering benefits the individual volunteers themselves, the organizations in which they are engaged, and the different communities in which the voluntary work occurs. However, there have been no previous studies focusing solely upon the experiences of physically disabled volunteers. By focusing upon the experiences of wheelchair users who volunteer, this paper aims to address this issue; furthermore, it is hoped that by drawing attention to the positive aspects of the volunteerism of disabled people, the paper will also raise awareness of what is, on the

whole, an "invisible" group of volunteers; and will thus encourage volunteer managers to actively recruit more disabled volunteers.

THE STUDY

Following an approach based upon grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1968), a total of 50 people were interviewed during the course of the study, 47 of whom were wheelchair users who volunteered (three were non-disabled managers of volunteers). All of the disabled volunteers, (from hence referred to as the volunteers), used a wheelchair whilst volunteering.

During the course of the study the volunteers discussed their activities in a total of 41 different voluntary and public sector organizations. The interviews, which were semi-structured in nature, concentrated on three main themes: volunteering and volunteerism, disability and volunteering, and the management of disabled volunteers.

The study findings: The benefits of volunteering

In many respects the main beneficiary of the voluntary activities discussed during the interviews was often seen to be the individual volunteer being interviewed. The four other beneficiaries also identified during the course of the study were

- Other disabled people;
- The general public;
- The organizations in which the volunteers were engaged; and
- External organizations, agencies and projects.

In addition to drawing attention to the fact that volunteers themselves are beneficiaries of the volunteer activities identified, the study also highlights the nature of the bene-

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fits received and the means by which such benefits were channelled.

1. Benefits for the volunteers themselves

All but two of the volunteers described how they personally benefited from their activities. Such benefits were primarily twofold and described in terms of being either psychological or functional in nature.

Psychological benefits

For many of the volunteers the most tangible personal benefit of volunteering was a belief that it had a positive impact on their personal psychological well-being and mental health:

Mentally I think it's definitely had an effect. It's given me an interest...

Angela

Yes. It keeps me alive, keeps me interested. It's stimulating...

Pat

Others articulated the psychological benefits of volunteering in terms of increased self-esteem and self-worth:

Yes, it makes me feel great. Not useless. If I didn't do it I'd feel useless...

Harry

It gives me self worth really... It gives me something to get up for...

Emily

It was evident that one of the psychological advantages of volunteering was enjoyment:

I find the more I do the more I enjoy... I'm helping myself by helping others.

Doug

I love it. I enjoy it. I enjoy meeting people... getting out there...

David

Psychological benefits associated with improved mental health and increased self-esteem were identified by almost all of the volunteers. However, for many, such individually-experienced benefits were perceived in terms of their previous work experiences and

were thus more functional in nature.

Functional benefits

Some of the younger volunteers had never been able to secure paid employment. For such volunteers one of the main benefits of volunteering was that it provided an enjoyable substitute for paid work:

I can't do a paid job...I thought volunteering was the next best thing...

Emily

It's very challenging...I'd like to do it full-time but I'm trapped...

Robert

The majority of the volunteers had, however, previously worked full-time. For these individuals, volunteering filled the personal void that is indicative of extended periods of unemployment and prolonged economic inactivity often forced upon those living with a chronic health condition or disability. For such people volunteering replaced paid work:

I felt as if I had to keep my mind occupied. I couldn't just sit at home and do nothing. ...

Jack

After I finished work I was looking for something to do. Full-time work became very difficult...

Alan

Like Alan and Jack, many of the volunteers viewed their activities as being analogous to paid employment—providing them with the opportunity to maintain work-related skills:

I didn't want to lose my counselling skills so I decided to volunteer...I know we give a good service, it's been beneficial to me.

Christine

Christine's assertion that she benefited from the service provided by the organization, in which she was engaged, mirrored the self-help philosophy of that organization. Like Christine, many of the volunteers were involved in activities manifested by notions of

self-help and social reciprocity (Titmuss, 1970; Raynolds & Stone, 1999).

2. The benefits for other physically impaired people

Self-help activities

The belief that by volunteering they were helping others in a similar position was expressed by many of the volunteers:

We provide transport for disabled people. I use the service myself...

Jackie

Another discussed how he had trained as a "disability benefits advisor" after benefiting from such a service himself:

[The organization] helped me through the most traumatic period of first becoming disabled...

Andrew

One of the most tangible services offered by the volunteers involved peer counselling:

I like to encourage people to look beyond themselves, their wheelchair...

Diane

It's about confidence, people who become disabled need to regain their confidence...

Angela

Several of the organizations of disabled people that were visited during the study were originally founded on a self-help basis. Such organizations provided many of the volunteering opportunities undertaken by the volunteers—who reciprocated by providing services for other disabled people.

Advocacy and Volunteerism

Although none of the volunteers were directly involved as advocates, the services offered by some were of an advocacy nature:

When times get tough and I feel I can't do this, I think I've got to, there's 13,000 wheelchair users out there in the country...

Jo

I'm also trying to get public transport more accessible.

...trying to help others get out and about...

Henry

One volunteer believed his political position afforded him an advocacy and representative role:

I won't be beaten. I want to help people with disabilities. My position [as a local politician] allows this.

Boris

The perception that by volunteering, individual volunteers were making a positive impact on the lives of other disabled people was constantly repeated; many also believed that their activities benefited the wider communities in which they were engaged.

3. Benefits for the wider community

Those not involved within disability-oriented organizations volunteered in some capacity with either children or adults; none were engaged in environmentally-focused activities.

Children and Young People

Five of the volunteers undertook activities that involved working with children and young people. One assisted during history lessons:

The important thing is that I talk to children about an entirely different thing. It's historical...

Shaun

Another described how children benefited from one-to-one attention whilst reading:

I try and sit where I can see what they're reading and I help with the difficult words...

Liz

One of the volunteers, a community-based outreach youth worker, believed his voluntary activities had wide-reaching benefits for the young people to whom he offered support:

Instead of them stealing cars, or whatever, I'll say to them "Are you interested in mechanics?"... If they are I'll get them on a course that's working with cars...

Robert

Robert believed that by diverting the youngsters' attention away from crime and by offering them nonjudgemental and empathetic support, he was benefiting the whole community through his voluntary work.

Adults

The majority of the volunteers involved provided welfare, advisory, and educational services to adults within their own communities. From one volunteer's perspective, the skills she had acquired during her previous employment as a human resources manager benefited both of the adult students with whom she volunteered:

I've found that this situation takes every ounce of my experience...the students understood where I was coming from...

Jean

Like Jean, several of the other volunteers felt that their employment-related skills benefited the organizations in which they were engaged; thus, the fourth beneficiary of the volunteers' activities identified within the study were the organizations in which they were engaged.

4. Organizational benefits: Volunteers' own organizations

The organizational benefits of volunteerism are reflected in the academic literature (McCurley & Lynch, 1998). From the perspectives of the disabled volunteers interviewed as part of the study, such benefits were indicative of the employment and life-related skills they felt able to bring to volunteering activities.

Employment Related Skills

Many of the volunteers had previously held highly skilful and responsible occupations. As such the skills they were able to

bring their organizations varied greatly. One volunteer described how her financial expertise enabled her to become the treasurer of her organization:

Because I have skills, bookkeeping skills, it's natural that I should become involved as treasurer...

Julie

Another believed her organization benefited from the practical skills she was able to offer:

I'm computer-literate. I was a typist previously, which helps. I'm good on the telephone...

Pat

Other employment-related skills offered by the volunteers included management, accounting, nursing and physiotherapy.

Life Experience and Disability

For one volunteer, a woman who had been disabled during childhood by poliomyelitis, her own life experiences enabled her to empathise with and encourage the disabled service-users of the organization in which she volunteered:

Basically it's about being myself. Being able to share my experiences and being able to encourage other people to have a go and get their confidence together.

Diane

Another felt that her personal experiences of disability during both childhood and adulthood enabled her to offer a high quality peer counselling service:

I have been disabled for many years and was a disabled child. On the counselling side, that makes a difference.

Angela

Such distinctive insight into what it feels like to be a disabled person was only one of the personal skills the volunteers believed benefited the organizations in which they were engaged. Others felt that the main skills they were able to offer their organizations

reflected other areas of their life experience such as good interpersonal and communication skills:

I'm a people person...I'm very sensitive when filling out welfare benefit forms...

Karl

My main skills are my ability to communicate well with others and generally get on with people...

Sarah

Throughout the study, previous life experience was identified as being one of the key benefits the volunteers felt they were able to offer the organizations in which they were engaged. Such individual skills and experiences also benefited those external organizations and agencies that the volunteers were required to work within as part of their voluntary duties.

5. Organizational benefits: External organizations, agencies, and projects

Life Experience and Disability

The majority of the volunteers were required to attend meetings within other organizations and agencies whereby they liaised with various health-care and social-work professionals. One volunteer described how he used his life experience to benefit the employees of those agencies in which he was engaged on behalf of his own organization:

I have a lot of experience dealing with officials such as social workers and health workers...

Simon

Others felt that their personal experiences as a patient and service user benefited the external agencies within which they volunteered as representatives of their "home" organizations:

Mainly my skills are as a disabled person; as a wheelchair user, as a patient, as a client.

Jo

The nature of their activities meant that the majority of the volunteers frequently

acted as representatives on behalf of their organization's (paid) management. Thus it was important for them to maintain a professional persona whilst displaying an ability to see beyond their own disability and personal circumstances.

It is evident that the benefits of volunteering varied greatly between individual volunteers and depended upon a number of factors including the type and location of the organization in which they were deployed, the sort of voluntary work undertaken, and the nature of the individual volunteer's disability.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Having analysed the volunteers' perspectives in relation to their volunteering, it is possible to divide the benefits of volunteering into two different areas: personal and external. The following paragraphs now consider these two areas of benefit and also draw attention to some of the perceived drawbacks of volunteering.

The personal benefits of volunteering

This paper commenced by drawing attention to the positive impact that the volunteers believed volunteering had on their psychological health. This positive benefit was in stark contrast to some of the negative health-related difficulties identified by the volunteers during the course of the interviews. Such health-related difficulties were often manifested by an exacerbation of an individual's disability-related symptoms, such as increased levels of fatigue and pain. From the study it is difficult to assess whether for the majority of the volunteers the benefits of volunteering in respect of improved psychological health outweighed any negative impacts on their physical and mental well-being. However, the fact that at the time of the interviews all of the disabled study participants were heavily involved in volunteering suggests that from their perspectives, the health-related positives of volunteerism far outweighed the negatives.

One of the main personal benefits of volunteering, which was strongly connected to improved psychological health, was enjoyment of the activities undertaken. The importance of enjoyment as a motivational factor

for volunteers is highlighted in the literature. However, for the wheelchair users interviewed as part of the study, it would appear that stereotypical views conceptualising volunteering as being a wholly altruistic activity are not totally accurate; with only one exception, all of the volunteers did so because they enjoyed it—none expressed wholly selfless motivations.

Whilst enjoyment of volunteering was a significant factor shaping the volunteers' experiences, for many volunteers, their enjoyment was manifested in the opportunity to utilise and maintain employment-related skills. For such individuals, volunteering was seen as a replacement for paid work. In this respect, through their voluntary activities, the volunteers were able to help themselves reduce any social isolation experienced as a result of their disability. Although there have been no previous studies examining the experiences of wheelchair users who volunteer, the perceived need to continue contributing to society following the end of paid employment supports previous study findings into the volunteering experiences of older volunteers (Greenslade & White, 2005; Kam, 2002).

For some of the study participants, volunteering represented an integral part of their individual (medical) rehabilitation—it helped them come to terms with disability. Social research focusing upon the rehabilitative role played by volunteering is somewhat scarce and tends to emphasise the positive benefits of volunteerism for people with mental health problems (Lum & Lightfoot, 2005; Musick & Wilson, 2003). There is clearly much scope for further research in this area.

External benefits of volunteering

One of the unforeseen issues to arise out of the study was that a small minority of the volunteers became involved in voluntary work after they themselves identified a gap in the services provided to disabled people within their own geographic areas. Such social entrepreneurship was described by five of the volunteers, all of whom were located in ruraly isolated areas characterised by high levels of social and economic deprivation. The organisations founded by these volunteers provided

much needed social, welfare, and leisure services.

Whilst some of the volunteers felt compelled to set up a service because of a perceived lack in social welfare and other service provisions, others began volunteering because they felt the need to put something back into their communities. The high number of volunteers engaged in service with not-for-profit agencies reflects a recent growth in social welfare and disability-focused service provision within the UK by the not-for-profit sector (Baldock, Manning, & Vickerstaff, 2003; Scott & Russell, 2001). This in itself has resulted in an increased number of services being offered by volunteers.

CONCLUSION

By highlighting the personal benefits of volunteering for volunteers themselves, this paper adds to knowledge about volunteering; it also contributes to disability literature by showing how personal experiences of disability may be used as a positive force to help both disabled people themselves and others within the wider community. The paper draws attention to the distinct contribution made to society by wheelchair users who volunteer, thus contradicting commonly-held stereotypes of disabled people as solely being the recipients of others' voluntary action. It reveals that severely disabled people can (and do) make a significant and noteworthy contribution to contemporary society.

In conclusion, for the volunteers interviewed as part of the study, the benefits of volunteering represented a complex mixture of individual altruism, social reciprocity, and the opportunity to achieve self-actualisation. Volunteering enabled the wheelchair users to address and overcome any social isolation experienced as a result of disability; moreover, the distinct nature of their previous life experiences greatly benefited the organizations in which they were engaged as well as the wider society as a whole.

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